DiCiccio must be involved in freeway meetings

Rapport with tribe could facilitate agreement

hen City Councilman Sal DiCiccio revealed last month that state and Valley officials had never made a formal proposal to the Gila River Indian Community to locate the South Mountain Freeway on tribal land, eyebrows shot up across Ahwatukee.

How could that be? If there was no formal proposal, why had the tribal council



voted twice against allowing the controversial freeway on the

reservation?

Then a GRIC spokesman confirmed that neither the Arizona Department of Transportation nor the Maricopa Association of Governments had made a formal proposal to the tribal council.

DiCiccio, who has dealt extensively with GRIC officials over the years as a councilman and developer, insists that a sincere and respectful overture from ADOT or MAG would be an essential first step in persuading the tribal council to at

least revisit the issue.

ADOT officials now say they're prepared to meet with tribal officials and will enlist U.S. Reps. Harry Mitchell and Ed Pastor for the effort. DiCiccio also should be invited to participate.

As we've said repeatedly in this space, the South Mountain Freeway must be built to, among other things, relieve congestion on Interstate 10, but also that a route even slightly south of Pecos Road would be preferable because it would lessen impact on existing neighborhoods and South Mountain Park.

A southern route also could enhance the economic potential of GRIC's Wild Horse Pass development.

But state and regional transportation officials have not disguised their impatience with this controversy, which has dragged on for more than two decades. They finally have the \$1.9 billion to build the freeway and have made it clear that preparations to begin construction will move forward. They've even suggested



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ominously that rerouting the freeway farther south could add \$500 million to its cost.

Perhaps. Surely, GRIC will want something of value from any prospective freeway deal. But moving the freeway away from some of the most valuable real estate in the Valley surely would save a hefty sum. Not having to blast through

part of the mountain also would save money.

Clearly, pursuing a potential agreement with GRIC is in the best interests of the people who will be most directly affected by the freeway — Ahwatukee and GRIC residents. If a win-win deal for both communities is possible — and it appears to be — then it needs to be pursued diligently and in good faith.

Just as clearly, a take-it-or-leave-it approach by state and regional officials impatient to get the freeway built probably won't sit well with GRIC officials, who are still waiting for the state to deliver on promises made when Interstate 10 was built through the reservation decades

That's why we'd also like to see DiCiccio at the table, at least during the initial meetings with GRIC officials. DiCiccio has forged a relationship with tribal officials based on mutual respect, which can be invaluable as this volatile issue comes to a head.

Excluding DiCiccio now would be a huge mistake.